

## **The Structure of White Power and Election 2000**

\*By Bob Wing

Vanessa Daniel of the Applied Research Center provided invaluable research assistance.

What if there was an election, and nobody won?

Thank you, Florida, for exposing as fraud the much-vaunted sanctity of the vote in this country and placing electoral reform back on the country's agenda. Reports indicate that black and Haitian voters were harassed by police, their names removed from the rolls, and their ballots left uncounted by outdated machines. Thirty-five years after passage of the Voting Rights Act, racist violations of election law are rampant and should be pursued to justice in Florida and elsewhere.

But beyond these immediate issues, this election reveals again just how central race is to U.S. politics and how racism is institutionally structured into the electoral system. The election reaffirms that people of color are the most consistent liberal/progressive voters in the country and that their clout is increasing--but that electoral racism effectively nullifies almost half of their votes. The Civil Rights movement destroyed the monopoly over power by whites, but the tyranny of the white majority is still institutionalized in the winner-take-all, two-party, Electoral College system.

Unless we place fighting electoral racism at the top of the racial justice agenda, we cannot challenge the political stranglehold of conservative white voters or maximize the growing power of people of color.

### **The Color of Politics**

The idea that race and racism are central to American politics is not just a theory that harkens back to the days of slavery. It's a current-day lived reality that is particularly evident in this country's biggest and most sacred political event: the presidential pageant.

According to the Voter News Service exit polls for Election 2000, 90 percent of African Americans voted for Gore, as did 63 percent of Latinos, and 55 percent of Asians. (No exit poll data on the Native American vote is available, but most have historically voted Democratic.) Combined, people of color accounted for almost 30 percent of Gore's total vote, although they were only 19 percent of voters.

Latinos, the country's fastest growing voters, went heavily Democratic--even in Texas--despite extensive efforts by the Republicans to sway them. Most Asians followed suit. People of color are becoming a larger portion both of the U.S. population and of the electorate, and voting largely in concert with each other in presidential elections.

On the other hand, whites constituted almost 95 percent of Bush's total vote.

Conventional electoral wisdom discounts race as a political factor, focusing instead on class, the

gender gap, union membership, etc. But, the only demographic groups that had a fairly unified vote--defined as 60 percent or more for one of the candidates--were: blacks, Latinos, Jews (81 percent for Gore), lesbians and gays (70 percent for Gore), union members (62 percent for Gore), residents of large cities (71 percent for Gore), and white males (60 percent for Bush). All but union members and big-city residents are racial or ethnic groups.

### **What was the "Gap"?**

The large numbers of people of color in unions (about 25 percent) and big cities largely account for the heavy Democratic vote of those demographic groups. White union members and city dwellers vote to the left of whites who live more racially isolated lives, but they barely tilt Democratic. Similarly, women voted 54-43 for Gore, but white women actually favored Bush by one point. Women of color create the gender gap.

The same can be said of the poor: although 57 percent of voters with incomes under \$15,000 voted for Gore, poor whites--who make up just under half of eligible voters in this category--broke slightly for Bush. The income gap in presidential politics is thoroughly racialized. As the sociologist William Form pointed out long ago, if only a bare majority of white working-class people voted consistently Democratic, we could have some kind of social democracy that would provide much more social justice than the conservative regimes we are used to.

Despite the pronounced color of politics, Ralph Nader (and his multi-hued progressive pundits) blithely dismiss the fact that he received only one percent of the votes of people of color.

### **Electoral College: Pillar of Racism**

The good news is that the influence of liberal and progressive voters of color is increasingly being felt in certain states. They have become decisive in the most populous states, all of which went to Gore except Ohio, Texas, and (maybe?) Florida. In California an optimist might even envision a rebirth of Democratic liberalism a couple of elections down the road, based largely on votes of people of color.

The bad news is that the two-party, winner-take-all, Electoral College system of this country ensures, even requires, that voters of color be marginalized or totally ignored.

The Electoral College negates the votes of almost half of all people of color. For example, 53 percent of all blacks live in the Southern states, where this year, as usual, they voted over 90 percent Democratic. However, white Republicans out-voted them in every Southern state (and every border state except Maryland). As a result, every single Southern Electoral College vote was awarded to Bush. While nationally, whites voted 54-42 for Bush, Southern whites, as usual, gave over 70 percent of their votes to him. They thus completely erased the massive Southern black (and Latino and Native American) vote for Gore in that region.

Since Electoral College votes go entirely to whichever candidate wins the plurality in each state, whether that plurality be by one vote or one million votes, the result was the same as if blacks and other people of color in the South had not voted at all. Similarly negated were the votes of the

millions of Native Americans and Latino voters who live in overwhelmingly white Republican states like Arizona, Nevada, Oklahoma, Utah, the Dakotas, Montana--and Texas. The tyranny of the white majority prevails.

Further, the impact of the mostly black voters of Washington, D.C., unfairly denied statehood, is undermined by its arbitrary allocation of only three electoral votes. And the peoples of Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, American Samoa, and Guam--which are colonies ruled by the U.S. and have greater populations than more than a quarter of the U.S. states--get no Electoral College votes at all.

### **Slave Power**

In his *New York Times* op-ed, Yale law professor Akhil Amar reveals that the hitherto obscure Electoral College system was consciously set up by the Founding Fathers to be the mechanism by which slaveholders would dominate American politics.

The Constitution provided that slaves be counted as three-fifths of a person (but given no citizenship rights) for purposes of determining how many members each state would be granted in the House of Representatives. This provision vastly increased the representation of the slave states in Congress.

At the demand of James Madison and other Virginia slaveholders, this pro-slavery allocation of Congresspersons also became the basis for allocation of votes in the Electoral College. It is a dirty little secret that the Electoral College was rigged up for the express purpose of translating the disproportionate Congressional power of the slaveholders into undue influence over the election of the presidency. Virginia slaveholders proceeded to hold the presidency for 32 of the Constitution's first 36 years.

Since slavery was abolished, the new justification for the Electoral College is that it allows smaller states to retain some impact on elections. And so it does--to the benefit of conservative white Republican states. As Harvard law professor Lani Guinier reports, in Wyoming, one Electoral College vote corresponds to 71,000 voters, while in large-population states (where the votes of people of color are more numerous) the ratio is one electoral vote to over 200,000 voters. So much for one person, one vote.

This year the Electoral College will apparently enable the winner of the conservative white states to prevail over the winner of the national popular vote--a tyranny of the minority.

### **Two-Party Racism**

The two-party system also structurally marginalizes voters of color.

First of all, to win, both parties must take their most loyal voters for granted and focus their message and money to win over the so-called undecided voters who will actually decide which party wins each election. The most loyal Democrats are strong liberals and progressives, the largest bloc of whom are people of color. The most loyal Republicans are conservative whites, especially those in rural areas and small towns. The undecideds are mostly white, affluent suburbanites; and both

parties try to position their politics, rhetoric, and policies to woo them. The interests of people of color are ignored or even attacked by both parties as they pander to the "center."

Another consequence is that a disproportionate number of people of color see no reason to vote at all. The U.S. has by far the lowest voter participation rate of any democracy in the world. The two-party system so demobilizes voters that only about 65 percent of the eligible electorate is registered, and only 49 to 50 percent usually vote (far less in non-presidential elections).

Not surprisingly, the color and income of those who actually vote is skewed to higher income, older, and more conservative white people. In the 1996 presidential election, 57 percent of eligible whites voted compared to 50 percent of blacks and 44 percent of Latinos. Seventy-three percent of people with family incomes over \$75,000 voted compared to 36 percent of those with incomes below \$15,000.

In addition, current electoral law disenfranchises millions of mainly Latino and Asian immigrants because they are not citizens. And, according to Reuters, some 4.2 million Americans, including 1.8 million black men (13 percent of all black men in America), are denied the right to vote because of incarceration or past felony convictions.

### **Proportional Representation**

To remedy these racist, undemocratic electoral structures, Lani Guinier and many others propose an electoral system based on proportional representation. New Zealand, Australia, all of the European countries except Great Britain, and many Third World countries have proportional electoral systems. In such systems, all parties that win a certain minimum of the popular vote (usually five percent) win representation in the Congress (or Parliament) equal to their vote. To win the presidency, a party must either win an outright majority or form a governing coalition with other parties.

Thus, for example, the German Green Party, which gets about seven percent of the vote, is part of the ruling coalition in that country. If we had such a system, a racial and economic justice party could be quite powerful. Instead, in our current system, voting for a third-party candidate like Nader takes votes from Gore and helps Bush. And someone like Jesse Jackson, who won 30 percent of the Democratic popular vote in 1988, is not a viable candidate, and his supporters have little clout in national politics.

If we fail to place fighting electoral racism at the very top of a racial justice agenda, we will continue to be effectively disenfranchised, and white people, especially conservative white Republicans, will enjoy electoral privileges that enable them to shape the policies and institutions of this country at our expense. We must eliminate the role of big money in elections and make voting readily accessible to poor folk.

Until we win a proportional system--or unless there is some other major political shake-up--the vast majority of people of color will continue to participate in the Democratic Party. Therefore we must resist the racist, pro-corporate rightwing of the Democratic Party, led by people like Al Gore, and demand that the Democrats more strongly represent the interests of people of color. However, our

ability to do this--or to build anti-racist third parties that include our peoples--depends upon our ability to form mass, independent racial justice organizations and to build alliances with other progressive forces both inside and outside the electoral realm.

Building electoral alliances--around issues, referenda, and candidates, both inside and outside the Democratic Party--is key to the maturation of a racial justice movement that functions on the scale necessary to impact national politics, social policy, or ideological struggle in this country.